

Newport County Unified High School  
Exploratory Committee  
Minutes

6:00 - 7:30 PM – April 29, 2014 – Middletown Public Library

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## Attendees

**Present:** **Barbara A. VonVillas**, Middletown Town Council, Chair

**Richard P. Adams**, Middletown Town Council; **Kellie E. DiPalma**, Middletown School Committee; **Sandra J. Flowers**, Newport School Committee; **Naomi L. Neville**, Newport City Council; **William R. O'Connell**, Middletown School Committee; **Robert B. Power**, Newport School Committee; **Marco T. Camacho**, Newport City Council (Alternate)

**Not Present:** **Justin S. McLaughlin**, Newport City Council, Vice Chair;

## Approval of Minutes

The minutes of April 17, 2014 were reviewed and unanimously approved.

## Discussion

### *A “White Paper” on High School Regionalization*

A draft and outline of a Discussion Paper (White Paper) and one-page listing of salient points which must be addressed was distributed to the Committee by Mr. Adams for consideration. After a general discussion of the content and organization of the paper, Dr. Power emphasized that it was his view that unification of the high schools was essentially unification of the Middletown and Newport school districts.

Using the example of the unification of all Newport elementary schools into the Pell School he pointed out that there were significant economies of scale and efficiencies to be realized by regionalization. He also noted that if a decision is made to build a new high school, the costs would be equally borne by the two communities, reducing the cost from an unacceptable \$100+M to something under \$40M.

He noted that such a figure was daunting, but not impossible if the communities were convinced that the new school would produce real gains in programs offered. He also suggested that unification could offer the option to retain two separate, small high schools, each specializing in unique curricula and programs.

Dr. VonVillas suggested that the Discussion Paper should include unification options, and that whatever was included was useful only so far as it assisted in promoting discussion in the communities. She said that the Committee should hold a series of public meetings and/or conduct surveys which would allow and promote public engagement on the unification issue. She indicated that the Committee should decide when the meetings should be held, with whom, and how to reach the broadest possible audience.

Ms. Flowers asked what feedback had been received from the city/town website requests for questions. It was noted that thus far very little response had been received and the input received had been very similar to the comments on Middletown's school facility survey.

Dr. Vonvillas reiterated that the paper should answer specific questions; 1) a realistic description of what a unified high school or “Aquidneck System School” would look like; 2) The costs involved; and 3) the educational programs offered at every level.

It was also suggested that scenarios developed should include site plans for new facility options, if available, and a discussion of how various scenarios might look in 10 or 20 years.

### *Where Do We Go From Here?*

Dr. VonVillas asked the Committee if she should proceed with contacting the League of Women Voters and/or similar organizations to arrange a public forum. The Committee agreed that she should investigate such an event with a date, place and time to be determined.

Mr. Adams asked if he should explore working with local universities to assist with conducting a survey and/or public events. The Committee agreed that he should do so.

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It was also agreed that all events would be approved by the Committee prior to proceeding.

In a general discussion of how a public information forum would work, it was suggested that various scenarios should be presented as background with relevant data such as educational programs offered, cost estimates, pros and cons of each case.

Ms. Flowers provided a list of the various groups which should be reached by the forum or other method of communication. The groups ranged from young families with and without children in the public school systems, parents of college-bound and/or career-technical students, parents of special needs students, educators, and families who are receiving financial assistance.

The Committee agreed to continue work on the White Paper as the basic document describing the elements of a Unified High School and School system as well as a PowerPoint for possible use at a forum.

## **Attachments**

Newport Daily News article reporting on this Committee meeting

## **Proposed Meetings Calendar**

The Committee agreed to meet as follows.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Place</b>
Wednesday, May 7 <sup>th</sup>	6 – 8 PM	Middletown Public Library
Thursday, May 29 <sup>th</sup>	6 – 8 PM	Newport Public Library

Respectfully Submitted,



Richard Adams

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## *Newport Daily News*

April 30, 2014

### **SCHOOL UNIFICATION TALKS**

#### **Committee shifts focus back to high schools**

**By Matt Sheley**

Staff writer

MIDDLETOWN — The concept of merging all levels of public schools in Newport and Middletown does not appear to be part of the unification talks between the two communities anymore.

Members of the Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee generally agreed Tuesday night that it made the most sense to keep their focus on the high schools, as it was when the committee was established.

Whether that would be in the form of one new combined high school or two specialized schools in the existing Rogers and Middletown high schools was not flushed out during the discussion at the Middletown Public Library; neither were potential locations for a new building, costs or other details.

Rather, committee members said they'd like to hear what residents and business people have to say during a community forum to be scheduled in the next month or two before deciding what course to take.

"We started out rushing and we got smacked down. We need to first do the ground work ..." said Barbara A. Von-Villas, a Middletown Town Council member who serves as chairwoman of the exploratory committee. "The thing that scared everybody way back in October (2013) was when the cost was put up there in front."

The unified board has been meeting since the beginning of the year, trying to see if the two communities could find common ground with schools facing declining enrollment, rising costs and demands to provide a quality education.

At first, the exploratory committee focused on merging the high schools, with the idea of putting referendum questions before Newport and Middletown voters in November.

Those conversations expanded to include all schools in both communities before the group opted last month to restart the process, when officials agreed things were moving too quickly.

On Tuesday night, sitting around a group of tables in the middle of the library meeting room, those on hand seemed re-energized about the prospects for the future.

It was the first time the exploratory committee met in Middletown; previous meetings were held at the Newport Public Library and the Newport campus of the Community College of Rhode Island. Other than a reporter, there was no one in the audience.

Early in the meeting, committee members agreed they faced an uphill battle when it was reported in early October 2013 that a new unified high school could cost close to \$150 million.

But when that figure was broken down by Newport City Council Vice President Naomi L. Neville and Newport School Committee member Robert B. Power — both members of the exploratory committee — there was consensus that it was much more palatable, particularly after the state reimbursed 40 percent of the cost, or about \$60 million, as it did with the new Pell Elementary School in Newport.

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Then, if the remaining \$90 million were split in half, each community would pay about \$45 million — still a lot of money, the officials said, but far more manageable, particularly when considering the needs as each of the schools. For example, Newport City Councilman Marco T. Camacho said Rogers needs a new roof, estimated at \$1.5 million, and a track complex estimated at \$1 million.

“Sometimes, if when you look at it in a different way (such as) what it’s going to cost you if you had to pony up for a new Rogers High School or pony up for a new Middletown High School, all of a sudden, it becomes a very interesting and attractive proposition and people might say ‘Wow! That might work for us,’” Power said.

Later in the meeting, committee members agreed they had quite a bit of work to do to firm up details of such a proposal, without appearing to have chosen a specific course of action.

A so-called “white paper” that spelled out the known specifics and goals without overwhelming people would be key, they said. So would be having a neutral group facilitate a community forum without pushing one agenda or another, and reaching different stakeholders, they added.

“I have to be assured that every effort will be made to reach out to all segments of our communities,” Newport School Committee member Sandra J. Flowers said.

Putting different options before residents and business people also is critical, committee members said, including possible locations for a new school, should that emerge as the favored option. Some sites discussed include the former Starlight Drive-in property on Aquidneck Avenue in Middletown and a vacant lot next to the CCRI campus off Connell Highway in Newport.

No votes were taken during the meeting. The next session is scheduled for Wednesday, May 7, at 6 p.m. at the Middletown library.

“I feel like what was really the snag originally was that our group came across too much like as already knowing the answers,” Neville said. “That’s not where we are anymore.”